

## Translating Personal Advising Philosophies to Personal Mission Statements

By Mike Merva

Despite NACADA's support for Freitag's (2011) idea that all academic advisors should write personal philosophies of advising, in practice advisors only write philosophies of advising when required—e.g., an advisor is up for an award, or a supervisor requires such a statement for a performance evaluation. Freitag suggests that these statements reflect the advisor's practices and the beliefs behind those practices. The only other literature specifically on advising philosophies is a short piece by Dyer (2007), who acknowledges the reflective aspect but also suggests that advising philosophies be thought of as personal mission statements which describe one's ideal practice.

Despite Dyer's description of these statements as helping to shape advising goals and objectives, Freitag believes that the goal should be reflection. He suggests that the most important questions for an advising philosophy are:

- Why am I an academic advisor?
- How do I make a difference in the lives of students and colleagues?
- Do my students know their lives matter?

These questions are important in developing a philosophy, but the answers will simply reflect what an advisor is already doing.

To illuminate the difference between a reflective advising philosophy as described by Freitag and an advising mission statement based on one's personal philosophy, we have to re-frame these questions:

- What kind of academic advisor do I aspire to be?
- What difference do I want to make in the lives of students and colleagues? (Or perhaps more to the point: What outcomes do I want to see as a result of my advising?)
- How can I enable my students to know their lives matter?

Personal mission statements have recently been discussed in the medical (Chew, Lee, and Ismail, 2014) and business (Laird-Magee, Gayle, and Preiss, 2015) fields, as ways to guide moral and ethical choices. In the broader context of the field of human resources, Morrisey (1992) explains that personal mission statements should be used to clarify "the conditions under which decisions will be made regarding whom you will serve, products or services you will provide, and the fundamental philosophy and personal values under which you expect to operate" (71). In this article, I will expand on Dyer's (2007) idea of an advising philosophy as a personal mission statement that should codify one's own beliefs into a personal theory of advis-

ing, which, in turn, should guide one to become a better practitioner (Hagen 2000). Personal advising mission statements must not only be informed and personal, as Freitag suggests, but also assessable. They should not simply describe what one does (or, even worse, demonstrate to an awards committee how great an advisor one is), but instead act as a yardstick against which one can measure one's advising practice.

### *A Good Personal Advising Mission Statement is Informed*

As Freitag notes, advising mission statements cannot be developed in a vacuum. The Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) has developed the broadest guidelines for academic advising units, which are designed to guide practice at any institution. UGA and individual colleges or school units also have (or should have) mission statements to guide advising practices. Ideally, the mission statements build on each other, getting more specific from the top down.

UGA's mission statement takes into account CAS's guidelines, but makes them more specific to our institution. Similarly, one's own college or school unit takes (or should take) UGA's goals and makes them more specific to the goals of that unit. For instance, Franklin College's advising mission statement, in addition to directing advisors "to provide information about the academic requirements and resources," includes the directive "to develop an appreciation for the enduring value of the liberal arts experience" (<http://www.franklin.uga.edu/oa/office-student-academic-services>).

Examining the mission statement of one's advising unit provides an ideal starting-point for developing a personal mission statement. What goals does this unit have for advising? How do these specific unit goals differ from UGA, CAS, and the Concept of Academic Advising as developed by NACADA? Analyzing these sources provides an understanding of what advising should achieve, both in general and in relation to one's college.

### *A Good Personal Mission Statement is Personal*

Personal mission statements do more than guide one's own advising. They help advisors understand themselves. If advisors are to help students understand their own development as learning beings (Crockett, 1987), advisors must also undergo the same process of understanding. A personal mission statement should not regurgitate a unit's or an institution's mission statement. It should begin from an analysis of one's own beliefs and values. It should describe what the individual advisor feels is most important to impart to students. For instance, is the advisor most concerned with helping a student pick the right major? Explore what it means to pursue a chosen major? Understand university policies? Describe how the curriculum fits together and enhances learning? A personal mission statement should

identify and clarify what an advisor values, and how those values affect the advisor's practices.

Furthermore, whether an advisor has standard or unique goals for each student, the advisor must explain how they achieve these goals. What strategy or practice is used? Being familiar with the scholarship on advising approaches can help advisors describe their practices; but, just as an advisor should not regurgitate unit mission statements, they should not regurgitate advising approaches. Instead, they should learn from these approaches to develop their own practices. Does the advisor use a proactive approach to give students the resources they need before problems occur? Or does the advisor believe students need to encounter setbacks to understand why they need the resources? No right answer exists; it's a matter of one's personal beliefs and values, and how one puts these into practice.

### *A Good Mission Statement is Assessable*

Unlike advising philosophies, an advising mission statement describes one's ideal, not actual, practice. A traditional advising philosophy is un-assessable, as an assessment of it would be akin to asking students whether an advisor is doing exactly what the advisor is doing. A mission statement, however, enables an advisor to be judged in terms of how well he or she is living up to his or her ideal practice. A personal mission statement, then, should not only explain one's theory of advising, and how one acts that out in practice, but also the outcomes one expects to see as a result of one's practice. These outcomes, then, can be evaluated through the advising assessment process described by Robbins and Zarges (2011). Self-assessment based on a personal advising mission statement enables an advisor to produce demonstrable evidence of operating successfully based on personally developed goals, as opposed to operating suc-

cessfully in the eyes of a supervisor. Furthermore, it provides feedback about how to adjust practices to better meet his or her own goals.

An additional benefit to developing an assessable mission statement is to provide support for promotions or reclassifications. Mission statements are likely to be an important aspect of the advising career ladder portfolio at UGA. If advisors can provide solid evidence that they have thought deliberately about goals and practices, and assessed how well they have achieved these goals, they can provide evidence that they are worthy of moving up the ladder or attaining a position with more responsibility. A personal mission statement proves that an advisor takes his or her job seriously and wants to be the best advisor he or she can be. As Grites (2001) pointed out, it is possible to operate without a theory of advising, and it is also possible to improve without a theory, but it is not possible to assess improvement without a codified theory which describes one's guiding principles and goals.

### *A Good Mission Statement is Peer-Reviewed and Revisited*

Just as students should not turn in a first draft of a paper, advisors should not be satisfied with a first draft of an advising mission statement. Advising mission statements ought to be reviewed to make sure they detail all desired outcomes and take into account institutional and unit goals. If one has focused extensively on one's own values and beliefs, the institutional and unit goals may have been overlooked. Similarly, if advisors focus too narrowly on institutional and unit goals, they may not have made the statement specific enough to their own practice. Having others look over a mission statement can help make sure there are no glaring holes in it, or missing information that is necessary in order to assess how well the advisor is living up to

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## **Championing a Cultural Shift in Advising**

**By Veronica Gilliard**

### *ARTICLE REVIEW*

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Charlie Nutt, "Creating a data-driven advising culture: Overcoming three central roadblocks," *Academic Advising Today* 40:1 (March 2017), p. online.

Today educational leaders are plagued with fears regarding access, affordability, accountability, and sustainability within higher education. The difficulty of balancing these complex concerns has spawned a culture of compliance in academic advising. Increasingly, institutions have begun to follow the cultural trend of pushing toward four-year graduation rates by any means necessary. As a consequence of this high-stakes priority, colleges and universities became relatively unconcerned with carefully diagnosing institutional problems and subsequently became fixated on the analysis of individual student traits and deficiencies. This conundrum of pushing students to graduate "on time" while simultaneously having a rather incomplete understanding of institutional barriers to student persistence and completion, has placed academic advisors in a uniquely vulner-

able position. In response to these challenges, Dr. Charlie Nutt, Executive Director of the National Academic Advising Association, recently wrote a piece entitled "Creating a Data-Driven Advising Culture: Overcoming Three Central Roadblocks."

The first road block identified by Dr. Nutt is dispelling the notion that academic advisors don't need institutional data, they solely need student data. It is nonsensical to diagnose an individual without paying any attention to the individual's environment. Yet, so often, this is the unorganized approach taken by educational leaders when observing student success and persistence. We must stop positing solutions without taking the time to investigate the causes. We have analyzed student deficiencies ad nauseam; it is now time to engage in comprehensive self-evaluation of our own institution's deficiencies, challenges, and structures which inhibit our students' ability to persist and succeed. Dr. Nutt refers to this as "leveraging data support by the entire campus community for quality academic advising efforts." This self-examination will require cross-departmental collaboration, an extensive time commitment, financial investments, and support from senior leadership in order to come to fruition. Above all, this process will require a level of transparency about the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats pervading our institutions. Even further, it will require a disruption of the hierarchical system which has historically and

the statement.

Finally, one should revisit mission statements often to reflect changes in one's advising philosophy. In interacting with other advisors and students, an advisor constantly engages with new perspectives and practices which may, and should, influence their own ideals. Reflecting on these changes on a regular basis can allow one to integrate new ideas into one's own philosophy in an intentional way. Consequently, changes in philosophy should result in changes in one's goals, and this should be reflected in one's advising mission statement.

### Conclusion

A traditional advising philosophy enables advisors to define the beliefs and values that guide their advising. However, to operate under the pragmatist model that Kimball and Campbell (2013) have suggested is at the philosophical heart of advising, advisors must also be able to reflect on how well those beliefs and values are serving students in practice. The assessable nature of a mission statement enables advisors to reflect on their practices, and make changes as necessary to improve their advising in accordance with their own beliefs and values. ■

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systemically kept academic advisors from being included in conversations about the undergraduate experience.

The second road block is the misconception that the latest software is a silver bullet to problems of student success and persistence. Predictive analytics and emerging software have introduced yet another angle of disruptive innovation, with software packages becoming the disruptors of professional academic advisors. Dr. Nutt exclaims, "Technology will not solve the problems our institutions are facing with our changing student demographics, our changing financial environment, and our changing public expectations for accountability that higher education has not faced in the past." This does not make new and emerging technology bad, but it is not a quick fix; instead it ought to serve as yet another data source which can be appropriately leveraged to solve problems and inform plans to address issues of institutional culture. Dr. Nutt reminds readers that the data gleaned from software packages should be interpreted with a diverse group of individuals, including, but not limited to, student support staff, academic advisors, and faculty.

The third road block is the fallacy that software training alone is sufficient for academic advisors. Educational leaders must invest more resources into professional development for academic advisors. Dr. Nutt states, "If our professional development continues to be primarily the technology system itself

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and on institutional policies and procedures, we will continue to have advisors who see their role as clerical or themselves as degree auditors. We cannot expect the quality of our academic advising experiences to grow if our professional development for academic advisors and faculty does not significantly change. The once-a-year advisor training program cannot continue in the higher education of the future." Specifically, this means viewing the academic advisor as engaged in continuing education on the interpretation of data, relationship building, student development theory, advising approaches, and more.

There are few roles in the academy more equipped to give voice to challenges of student persistence and degree completion than academic advisors. The institutional data which drives the decision making for undergraduate students must no longer be considered privileged information. Instead, it is time for a culture shift within our colleges and universities, where we leverage institutional data, alongside other tools, to inform our planning and decision making. In order to provide high-quality advisement, advisors must be granted access to clear institutional data about policies, procedures, and practices in addition to student data. Without these critical pieces of information, academic advisors will operate relatively uniformed on how to best support their students as they enter, navigate, and exit the institution. ■

# Advising Student-Athletes: A Case for Campus Collaboration

By Will Lewis

The University of Georgia houses 500+ student-athletes competing across 19 men's and women's sports. Each student-athlete is assigned a team-specific Academic Athletic Counselor (hereafter "counselor"). Currently, the UGA Athletic Association employs seven of these counselors, each covering at least two teams apiece.

The responsibility of counselors is wide-ranging. While they take an interest in the personal and career development of their students, their primary focus and function is the maintenance of athletic eligibility (Friedman, 2008, p. 51). While counselors are aware of what advisors discuss with students in a general sense, they have limited interaction with the advising community beyond the course selection guidance advisors provide.

Though some would suggest that there is a "conflicting agenda" (Friedman, 2008) between advisors and counselors on campuses across the country, I do not feel that an outright conflict exists at UGA, but rather an unfamiliarity with the role and intentions of each group. Neither side seems to bare sole responsibility for this, but certainly there is room for increased communication. For one, assuming that the information an advisor provides a student is going to make its way in its entirety to the counselor is simply not wise. For another, the only apparent push from the Athletic side to further the relationship with advisors has been the course offered via the Academic Advising Certificate program.

To improve the relationship between advisors and counselors, it is important first to understand the relationship that the student-athletes have with their counselors. As freshmen, student-athletes trust their counselors over their advisors and usually verify with their counselor everything their advisor suggests or asks them to do. The reason for this is that their counselor was likely involved with their recruiting visit and has the proximity via the Rankin Smith Student-Athlete Academic Center to answer their questions. Counselors, too, have the authority to assign Academic Mentoring and Tutoring within the Center and to insure that the student-athlete attends. Furthermore and in most cases, their counselor is going to remain their counselor for the duration of their time at UGA, whereas their advisor will typically change with every major switch and movement from lower- to upper-division coursework.

And yet, counselors have no more say than an advisor in a student's choice of major. Like advisors, counselors offer advice based on the logistics and reality of degree completion in a given major but, ultimately, will leave the major choice in the hands of the student. It is a shared belief that students perform better when they find fulfillment in the courses they are pursuing. According to the Athletic Association's Director of Student Development, UGA can boast one of the country's greatest

variety in major choice for student-athletes at 79-89 majors for its 500+ students.

One of the notable differences between the roles of advisors and counselors is simply the environment that counselors occupy. Friedman (2008) notes that "Traditional academic advisors need to understand the additional (and at times enormous) pressures athletic academic-support professionals face while trying to help their student-athletes balance competing athletic and academic agendas" (p. 55). Everything in the athletic sphere tends to operate at double the speed of the rest of campus; information and deadlines are constantly needed and approaching. Hence direct communication between advisors and counselors—be it via email, phone, or thorough notes in SAGE—can truly be helpful.

Given the immense role of counselors, what can advisors offer these students beyond course recommendations and referrals to campus resources? For one, advisors don't answer or report to the student's coaches. Advisors have no allegiance to any part of the Athletic side of the student experience, and that can be a benefit for the student. If a student requests that certain information not be reported to their counselor, the advisor does not have to (the usual mandatory report topics notwithstanding). For example, I have had students confide in me that they intend to transfer and have requested that I write them a recommendation letter. It's not that they did not trust or value their counselor's input; it's simply that they did trust me as an academic resource and knew that I did not have to inform their coaches of this decision. Another example would be when a student leaves their team or runs out of eligibility, at which point their advisor becomes their primary point of contact as they transition into the general student population. In both cases, advisors can build rapport and trust with the student early on, providing them a resource when they eventually need it.

Yet, assisting student-athletes in transition is not our only function with this population. Advisors can best aid these students by having them focus on the big picture as opposed to the day-to-day answers and solutions they might seek from their counselors. For a student population that generally excels with kinesthetic and visual learning, helping them to connect the dots between what is necessary now and what will be necessary in the future can act as both a stress management technique and an academic motivator. Advisors can and should set expectations early for student-athletes that at least once a semester they will meet with us to have a conversation about long-term goals. All in all, more direct and consistent communication between advisors and counselors can be beneficial to this end and to the overall success of the student-athlete. ■

## References

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